

Living LENT

By: Kristi Quinlan

We've heard the phrase, "What *would* Jesus do?" As we start the season of Lent, a better question is, "What *did* Jesus do?" **Jesus**, about to transition from the hidden mission of home to the public mission of proclaiming the Good News of God's love, **was drawn to pray and fast for 40 days in the desert.** The desert. Why would Jesus go there – on purpose? Though preparing for a big life-change, his instinct wasn't to *busy* himself. It was to retreat. To quiet himself. To listen. To allow himself to be tested in his core. To encounter the Father and let his heart be focused, nourished, and shaped for his mission.

We are invited to metaphorically enter the desert each Lent. *What are we preparing for?* Our own mission. . . God's mission for us: life. . . as followers of Jesus and witnesses of his love. We also prepare to celebrate during Holy Week and Easter the events that most define our Christian faith: the suffering, death, and rising of Jesus. ***Why desert?*** Fewer distractions, no pretense, just you as you are and God as he is. What is your image of "desert"? Stark and spare? Deserts can also be places of life and beauty. ***But how do we enter the "desert"?*** While flying to Arizona would be nice this time of year, the church offers three more feasible ways we can all seek a desert encounter with God: **prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.**

This resource will offer perspective on these three practices, as well as offer practical ideas and aids for how to live them – individually, and as families. **Though *roughing it in the desert* implies some discomfort. . . go for it.** Embrace it. It is purposeful. It is the Lord we seek. . . and the truth about ourselves. . . so that God can heal what is broken. We trust, by the power of his Resurrection, he will bless our desert sojourn with newness of life and renewed energy for our mission. So. . . *live* Lent.

Four Lenten **ESSENTIALS**



1. Reflect on your **LENTEN PLAN**

"May we not let this time of grace pass in vain. . ." -- Pope Francis, Lenten Message 2020

Catholics hold two truths in tension: the **more effort** we put into disposing/preparing ourselves for something the **better the outcome, and**, in the words of Pope Francis, "**Holiness is not achieved by our efforts**, for it is **grace!**" He continues, "By ourselves, we cannot remove the dust that sullies our hearts. Only Jesus, who knows and loves our heart, can heal it. Lent is a time of healing." (Pope Francis, Lenten Message 2020)

- Even if Lent is already underway, **take some quiet time** individually, and as a family, **to ask Jesus** what "dust" he wants to help you remove. What life-giving ways of being does he want to help you adopt? Where is the desert in which he's waiting to meet you? Help kids see Lent positively and even enjoy the togetherness of it.
- **Write down your plan** with a what, when, and how. Include one item for each of the following three practices. (Further practical ideas and resources for all three are included later.) **Keep it simple!** Review it daily. Step out to live it faithfully. Be open to God working his own plan.

*These adult, child, and family **templates** may be helpful planning guides. (Other similar resources [here](#).)*

LENTEN LINGO

Paschal Mysteries:

Jesus' suffering, death and rising from the dead

Holy Week:

The week prior to Easter, beginning with Palm Sunday

Holy Triduum:

Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday

Penance:

Some action to express sorrow for having done wrong

Learn more:

[Your Guide to a Catholic Lent](#)
[FAQs About Lent](#)
[Bishop Barron, on Lent](#)

The Stations of the Cross

Meditated on especially during Lent, these 14 stops along Jesus' way of the cross (or *Via Crucis*) adorn churches around the globe. Join your parish to pray communally each Friday of Lent and/or use these links to enter into this prayer at home, too.



- ◆ A couple insightful **articles**: [How can we make sense of suffering?](#) and [Unlock the Stations of the Cross, Examen Style](#)
- ◆ [Digital Stations](#) for use as a family. **Slides with images and brief reflections for children.** Also available as a [printable](#).
- ◆ **For little kids**, [color the Stations](#) and post around house. Add one every few days. Process with a candle to each. Name the Station, genuflect, and pray, "Thank you, Jesus. We love you."
- ◆ In many Hispanic cultures, it's traditional to act out the Stations (watch one version [here](#)). Kids may try their own **live Stations**.
- ◆ [Stations of the Cross for teens](#), [Stations of the Cross for Elderly](#)



2. Add an element of **PRAYER & faith talk**

"Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God" – St. John Damascene

All that we do can be prayer. However, **like any "vital and personal relationship" (CCC #2558)**, it's **important to take time regularly, to turn our full attention to God** (think quiet desert). We seek to **encounter God**: becoming aware of and learning to enjoy his presence, laying bare our hearts to him, and listening to his "still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:12) – especially through his Word, Sacred Scripture. Lent is a time to start praying if you're not; and if you are, to take it up a notch or renew one of your existing moments of prayer – living it with special attention. It is also a time to **intentionally learn and talk about faith with those close to us** – to raise our awareness, hear God's call to our own hearts through the words of others, and encourage each other on the journey.

- **Make [Sunday Mass](#) central** to your week – we gather together to feed our souls on God's Word and Jesus in the Eucharist, and are empowered to bring the love of Jesus out to the world. Read about features unique to Lenten Masses [here](#) and [here](#).
- **Choose a form of prayer and a moment of learning/talking about faith with your family** – under the same roof or virtually. I recommend [these Faith Conversations](#) (include: conversation starters & a recommended form of fasting and almsgiving).
- **Choose a form of personal prayer you'll make part of your day/week.** Write it in your Lenten plan with a scheduled time.



3. Give something up — **FASTING**

"Created things. . . can become so dominant that we can forget the deepest longing of the heart. . . God . . . we fast, so as to allow that deeper hunger to emerge." —Bishop Robert Barron, WOF 220: Entering the Desert of Lent

Loosely understood, fasting is **purposefully going without something that is part of our ordinary lives**. It traditionally curbs physical pleasures (eating, drinking, etc.), but can also be extended to other aspects of our habitual existence, think: unkind speech, judgmental or overly anxious thinking, digital screen time, etc. **Fasting can**: remove distractions, remind us of our dependence on God and others, realign our behaviors and strengthen our hearts to be more Christ-like, allow us to unite ourselves to the suffering Jesus, express sorrow for our sins, and get us in touch with the needs/suffering of others – who live without, not by their choosing. In the desert-like starkness of fasting, might God allow us to **encounter ourselves** in a new way?

- Make the necessary plans for **fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday**, and **abstaining from meat on all Fridays** of Lent.
- **Consider what God is inviting you personally, and/or as a family, to give up this Lent.** Chisel away at a specific bad habit or attitude, or simply bring Lent into your physical life or free up time/resources for God or the needy. Write it in your plan.

Fasting strictly understood

- **Ash Wed. & Good Fri.**
- Catholics age 18-59
- Meatless: 1 full meal, 2 smaller meals together not equaling a normal meal
- Only liquids between meals
- Exemptions include: the ill & pregnant and nursing mothers
“In all cases, common sense should prevail. . .” -- [USCCB](#)

Abstinence

- **All Fridays of Lent**
- Catholics age 14 and up
- No meat or poultry
- Fish, eggs, dairy are allowed



Image: Freepik.com

While not a holy day of obligation, attending Ash Wednesday Mass can be a good start to this season. Explain to kids beforehand that the ashes are from last year’s Palm Sunday palms. The ashen cross traced on our foreheads marks us with the sign of Jesus to show we are his friends. It reminds us that God *made* us from “dust” (see Genesis 2:7 - life is a gift for which we’re humbly grateful), and when we die our bodies *again* become dust (though because of Jesus we no longer need to fear this). The ashen cross is therefore a sign of the Good News of Jesus, to whom we commit to living more closely, especially this Lent.



4. Choose a way to give — **ALMSGIVING**

“And if there is among them a man that is poor or needy ... they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food.” – Aristides, Apologia, XV

Prayer and fasting, done well, bear real fruit in our actions toward others. Christ-like love, “in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18) begins with our family, and extends out to all we encounter in our day (face-to-face, digitally, or in traffic). But Christ’s command to love goes even further: to our enemies (which we Americans seem to have created more of these days, within our own circles) and, in a preferential way, to anyone in need – for *all* are our brothers and sisters. **Almsgiving is a specific kind of love, that of sharing our time, talent, and resources with the poor** – not just painlessly out of our excess, as the quote above illustrates, but in a way that costs us. This is the Christian way of life, given special focus during Lent. If we’re looking, we’ll discover many people with needs in our own communities. In our Lenten “desert,” might we **encounter “the other”** in a new way?

- Do some personal/family **research on the Church’s social justice teachings** and on **the needs of people in your community** and the organizations set up to help them. Why social justice? This maxim is enlightening, “Charity gives. Justice changes.”
- **Adopt an ongoing “project” to actively help the needy this Lent.** Simple – kids doing extra chores to “earn” coins for a [CRS Rice Bowl](#), OR [more involved](#) – volunteering or mobilizing your neighborhood to help. Write your project in your Lenten plan.

More ideas and resources:

PRAYER AND FAITH TALK

- ⇒ **Place a crucifix** or other objects (a cactus?) where they’ll remind you to live this Lent with Jesus.
- ⇒ **Create a word art poster** with desert words. How can this image guide and enrich your Lent?
- ⇒ Spend **5-10 minutes in desert silence with God each morning** before your mind gets loud. Perhaps include a reading of the [daily Gospel](#). [Teach](#) kids silent prayer with [Shh– God is in the Silence](#).
- ⇒ Lent is a time for noticing God’s love in our lives, and how we respond. The **daily examen** helps us do that. If you’re not familiar, or simply want to renew your existing examen, here’s a [guide](#). Introduce this practice to your [kids & teens](#). Try to get to **Confession** at some point during Lent.
- ⇒ Other online resources: Busted Halo’s Lenten [3 minute video](#), lots of great stuff for all ages at [Loyola Press](#), adult reflections at [Creighton Online](#), [daily video reflection](#) from Dynamic Catholic, [Hallow](#) app.
- ⇒ Books: [The Paschal Mystery](#) (Word on Fire), [New Wine](#) (Blessed Is She), [Learning to Pray: a guide for everyone](#) (Martin), [The Inner Chapel](#) (Eldredge), [Braving the Thin Places](#) (Stanz), [Life is Messy](#) (Kelly).



PRAYER AND FAITH TALK *(continued)*

⇒ For kids 7 & up: [Brother Francis presents the Stations of the Cross](#) (DVD). Accompany your child. Though kid-friendly images, the sufferings of Jesus trouble little kids, a good reminder to us adults.

For simple **prayer or conversation at family mealtime** or before bed:

- ⇒ Reflect on one Station of the Cross per day or one mystery of the [Rosary](#).
- ⇒ Pray [before meals](#). Add a Scripture/Lenten prayer, like “We adore you, O Christ, & we praise you. Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.”
- ⇒ Discuss a [corporal work of mercy](#) per week. Example: “Feed the hungry.” Favorite foods, gratitude for our food, where it comes from/who makes it possible, people who don’t have enough, how can we be better stewards, how can we serve each other in this regard, how can we help those who don’t have, how are we fed spiritually/who makes that possible. . . Resources at [CRS](#) can help.

More ideas and resources: **FASTING**



*Try these
meatless soup recipes.*

- ⇒ **Friday fish fry dinners & soup suppers** are common at parishes. If you can’t make it, have a family event at home! This family had [soup every night one Lent](#) as their fast.
- ⇒ **Live in solidarity with the poor on select days:** ration your water (timed showers, washing dishes/clothes by hand, a gallon jug for drinking/teeth-brushing, etc.), eat only rice and beans, turn down the heat in your house a couple degrees, etc. Explain: the purpose is to help us feel with needy people. When it’s uncomfortable, offer up that hardship to Jesus as a prayer for those who always live that way. Money saved from these exercises can be given to charity. Be creative and add elements of fun. Afterwards, discuss your experience. [Resources](#) from CRS help make the needs of others real.

Give up something as a family, and/or individually – whatever God puts on your heart:

- ⇒ Food/drink: sweets, dressing on your salads, your favorite breakfast cereal, pizza (or whatever the family favorite is), alcohol, second helpings, the sugar or cream in your coffee, eating out/ordering in (save the money for charity)...?
- ⇒ Other things to give up: any media that’s become too dominant in your life, complaining, speaking ill of others, interrupting, procrastinating, worrying, scowling, impatient responses, being defensive, avoiding those with whom you don’t see eye to eye...?
- ⇒ Other family sacrifices: adopt a family exercise routine, make all your family movie-nights faith-related films (like these great [saint movies](#). . . or [these](#); don’t forget the popcorn!), wake up 5 minutes earlier for family morning prayer...?

More ideas and resources: **ALMSGIVING**

- ⇒ Lent is a time to give, but also to examine where **the Gospel hasn’t yet changed our hearts and society in regards to the marginalized**. Catholic **social (justice) teachings are Gospel principles applied to social systems**. This [3 minute video](#) is a good intro. Distilled into [7 principles](#) (for [kids](#)). Form yourself. Give time, talent, and resources purposefully.
- ⇒ Check out **local charities**. Some **big Catholic charities** with the “...teach a man to fish...” approach: [Catholic Relief Services](#), [Catholic Campaign for Human Development](#), & [Catholic Charities](#) (local branches give specific volunteer/donation possibilities.)
- ⇒ The **needs of those marginalized by racism** continue to call our attention. All of us must inform ourselves, examine our own hearts, and make the difference to which God calls us. **Resources:** succinct answers to [questions sparked by recent events](#); the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ pastoral letter on racism [Open Wide Our Hearts](#) as well as a [study guide](#); an extensive Catholic [list of resources](#) on racism, a [children’s book](#).
- ⇒ The **corporal works of mercy** (for [kids](#)) are **better suited to little kids** than the social teachings. This [two-part article](#) gives ideas for helping kids live mercy first in the home, then beyond. This [pictorial checklist](#) gives space to write in your own plan.
- ⇒ **Involve kids in:** packing a bag of packaged snacks & cash to keep in the car for needy people you encounter, going through clothes/toys and giving extras to someone you know or to a shelter, shopping for and delivering food/household items to an unemployed friend or a food-shelf, preparing meals for elderly on meager pensions or new moms on meager sleep schedules, doing a neighborhood food drive. Kids are full of ideas. Ask them and let them own the [project](#)!

For ideas & resources for living
the 50-day Easter Season (yes, longer than Lent!) [click here.](#)

Feast days within Lent

While “feasting” is not particularly Lenten, there are a few special days in the Lenten calendar that merit *celebration*.

March 17 – *St. Patrick’s Day*

March 20 – *Solemnity of St. Joseph*

March 25 – *Solemnity of the Annunciation*

Click [HERE](#) for some fun ideas for how to celebrate them.

